

VA News for the Week of May 30, 2005

MARTIN:

This week...

It's the week of Memorial Day and we've got so many bugles – it's got to be a world record...

RESPESS:

We've got a little-known history lesson related to Arlington National Cemetery...

MARTIN:

And from Austin, we have a story about VA employees who handle more paper than just about anyone, any where...

RESPESS:

Stay tuned. We've got that... and more... coming up... in just a minute.

MARTIN:

Hello, I'm Don Martin with the Office of the Medical Inspector.

RESPESS:

And I'm Lisa Respess with the Office of Public Affairs. We're glad you could join us for this week's VA News.

RESPESS:

What a sight it was. Eight-hundred and sixty-six buglers, trumpeters and other horn players stationed every 100 yards on 41 miles of rural western New York roads performed a cascading rendition of Taps.

The Echo Taps project was an Armed Forces Day tribute, created to highlight the scarcity of buglers at veterans' funerals.

It began at the Woodlawn National Cemetery in Elmira with three haunting notes from the bugle of 15-year-old Hannah Sollecito of Baldwinsville, N.Y. The 24-note melody overlapped from one instrument to the next, reverberating through a string of small towns from Painted Post to Campbell to Savona, before closing out three hours later at the bath National Cemetery. There, all 866 musicians played a haunting rendition of taps that those in attendance will not soon forget.

RESPESS:

With 1,800 veterans requiring burial every day, there are not nearly enough buglers to perform funeral honors. Digital renditions on electronic equipment are becoming more and more the norm. The armed forces have about 500 musicians who perform taps, but many have been sent to war. About 3,800 civilian volunteers in the four-year-old bugles across America fill in where they can. Organizers are awaiting word if the effort will get a Guinness Book of World Records mention for the longest line of brass instruments playing the same tune.

MARTIN:

VA Inspector General Richard Griffin last week released a report by his office on variances from state to state in VA disability compensation payments. Mr. Griffin, Secretary Nicholson and Under Secretary for Benefits Daniel Cooper first appeared at the National Press Club in Washington for Mr. Griffin to release the report and brief the media. The next day, the three appeared at a Chicago Town Meeting with Illinois Senators Barack Obama and Richard Durbin. The report was requested early in 2005 by then Secretary Anthony Principi to explain how Illinois was last in average disability payments for more than 20 years. Some issues regarding subjectivity in decision-making were found and recommendations were made and accepted by Admiral Cooper.

MARTIN:

You can read or download the entire report on-line from the VA Web address on the screen. Click on the first item – "Review of State Variances in VA Disability Compensation."

RESPESS:

On Memorial Day, nowhere is more hallowed to our nation than Arlington National Cemetery. Its rows on rows of granite stones are instant reminders of the price paid... its peaceful, tranquil settings carefully preened to reflect a grateful nation.

MARTIN:

But there's always a story-behind-the-story and this one reflects how this sacred place was forged in strife and turmoil. Jim Benson reports from Arlington House – the Robert E. Lee Memorial.

BENSON:

Memorial Day, a national day of remembrance, set aside to honor all those who gave their lives in service to their country as members of its armed forces.

National cemeteries, final resting places for many of those who served and have since died, are focal points for many Memorial Day activities, public and private.

Arlington National Cemetery, the first national cemetery, is first in the minds of most Americans when they think of shrines to their fallen warriors.

Peaceful settings and "rest in peace" are the physical and spiritual touchstones of the healing atmosphere surrounding these sacred sites.

What many of us don't realize, or perhaps have forgotten, is that the sites themselves have often sprung from less than peaceful conditions or noble intentions.

Speaking of noble intentions, one of the biggest decisions of the 19th century was made in this room – the bedroom of Robert E. Lee. Here he decided to resign his commission in the U.S. Army and cast his lot with the Confederacy.

Beyond these windows lies Arlington National Cemetery. It serves as a prime example of one such place not begun with noble intent.

Arlington, Virginia, 1864. For three years, the Civil War has been tearing at the fabric of American life along the seam that divides North from South, industrial from agrarian, free from slave, neighbor from neighbor and brother from brother.

It was mid-May and the stench of death hung over Washington and the surrounding countryside as more and more dead and dying soldiers arrived from nearby battlefields. Hospitals and mortuaries were overflowing, as was the cemetery at the Soldiers' Home where 8,000 were already permanently at rest.

Riding with the President through the Arlington Plantation, former home of the Confederacy's premier commander, General Robert E. Lee, Major General Montgomery C. Meigs, Quartermaster General of the Union Army, noticed bodies being collected from the temporary hospital set up there, to be delivered to the Soldiers' Home. Halting the presidential carriage, Meigs instructed the men to bury the bodies where they were.

This very practical solution was, according to some, motivated by Meigs' desire to show how much he despised Lee, a fellow West Pointer and under whom he had served earlier in his career, for his disloyalty to the Union.

Angered by his discovery that earlier burials were made away from Arlington House, he insisted that subsequent interments be made as close as possible to the mansion to make any future return by the Lee family impossible. Meigs went on to recommend that 200 acres of the estate be set aside as a final resting place for Union soldiers and Secretary of War, Henry M. Stanton, quickly agreed.

One of the first monuments to Union dead constructed, under Meigs' orders, was a stone and masonry burial vault, 20 feet wide and 10 feet deep, in the home's rose garden for the remains of 1,800 casualties from the Battle of Bull Run.

So, who was this man, Montgomery C. Meigs, whose skill and spitefulness gave birth to the nation's first national cemetery? According to his gravestone, and himself, as many historians would tell you, he was "Soldier, Engineer, Architect, Scientist, Patriot."

A soldier first, the Georgia-born Meigs graduated fifth in his class at West Point and, following an initial posting in artillery, was assigned to the Army Corps of Engineers. Later, he would build a system of canals, tunnels, bridges and reservoirs to bring water to Washington D.C.

He brought his architectural skills to bear when he was assigned the task of supervising construction of the U.S. Capitol's cast-iron dome and extension of each congressional chamber.

Whether you spend this Memorial Day at Arlington or one of VA's 120 national cemeteries, you may want to reflect on Montgomery C. Meigs, whose less than noble intent 141 years ago, lead to the creation of special places across the country where we can go to honor, reflect and be at peace.

With today's warriors still serving and dying for the sake of freedom and liberty, having such places to go, is a gift for which we can truly be thankful.

For VA News, I'm Jim Benson.

RESPESS:

Congratulations to the VHA Special Projects Office for its "Affirming the Commitment" National Campaign. Before the campaign even kicked off, a video created by Special Projects and the Employee Education System to introduce the program was chosen a winner of the highest honor in the 2005 Videographer Awards competition. The Award of excellence was received by only 14 percent of nearly 2,300 entries from throughout the U.S. and foreign countries. Affirming the Commitment is a national initiative aimed at establishing better understanding and appreciation of veterans and their military service; creating a culture in which we own VHA's mission, a culture based on commitment and pride in serving veterans; and making VHA a more gratifying place to work by reinforcing the importance of our service.

MARTIN:

There are 18 VA Employees, deep in the heart of Texas, who mean more to each and every one of us at VA than just about anyone. And most of us don't know the name of one of those 18 people. Any idea who I'm talking about? Give up?

Melodee Mercer and Temple, Texas, Videographer Stefan Greene went to Austin to get the scoop.

MERCER:

Here's a little quiz for you, what is the one department in VA, which, if it shut down, would impact every single employee throughout VBA, VHA and NCA?

The answer is the Financial Services Center in Austin, TX, which is responsible for all our paychecks. Every two weeks, 18 employees in this center issue payments for over 240,000 employees worldwide. In fact, they are the 2nd largest civilian payroll provider. Yet they have been doing their job so well for over 30 years that we may never think about all the work it takes to get us our paycheck.

MERCER:

In addition to payroll, the other thing they do for all employees each year is to get out our W-2s and they handle our retirement pay. But there is so much more that the center does both for individual departments in VA and for other federal agencies.

MERCER:

The center has much to be proud of. They have won many awards, including the GOA Best Practices award highlighted in Executive Magazine in 2002.

As someone who is occasionally intimidated by balancing her own checkbook, I am in awe of the folks at the Financial Services Center who balance the books for all of us every two weeks. Reporting from Austin, TX, this is Melodee Mercer for VA News.

MARTIN:

Thanks to Melodee and Stefan Greene for getting that story for us. They were in Austin to pick up the Award of Excellence for the VA News D-Day Memorial Special Edition at the annual awards ceremony of the National Association of Government Communicators.

MARTIN:

Yes, that was Lisa and the other staff members of Vanguard at the table. They were in Austin to pick up the same award for VA's employee newsletter.

Stefan also got us this week's did you know segment with Finance Center Director Rodney Wood.

MARTIN:

That's VA News this week. Tune in to the Communications Channel for VA News and a variety of informative programming throughout each day. I'm Don Martin.

RESPESS:

And I'm Lisa Respass. Thanks for joining us. We hope you have a great week.

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